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Public relations recruitment as boundary-making: The client, the 'fit' and the disposability of diversity

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Abstract

In this article we explore the ways in which specialist recruitment practices for the PR industry influence the pursuit of diversity in the profession. Drawing on interviews from an exploratory study of specialist PR recruitment in the UK, we combine Abbott's theory of boundary-making between professional fields with existing research on the exclusionary dynamics of recruitment in professions, to explain how PR recruitment consolidates the focus on client and candidate 'fit,' and is likely to work in favour of preserving the dominance of middle-class, white and gendered identities in the profession. In this context, diversity is perceived as a risk rather than an opportunity and becomes a casualty of professional logic.

Keywords

Public relations recruitment, diversity, discrimination, professional field, boundary-making

Introduction

The issue of diversity in public relations has been a long-standing interest for scholars, producing a consistent body of work since the publication of the *Velvet Ghetto* in 1986

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(Cline et al., 1986). Considerable attention has been paid to the structural reality of inequalities in the profession – for example, the low numbers of practitioners from minority ethnic backgrounds, the gendered hierarchies of the profession, and/or the classed and ageist make-up of the practitioner body. The majority of this work has been carried out in the US context (Logan and Ciszek, 2021; Pompper, 2013; Tindall and Waters, 2012; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017), although a small amount focuses on the UK (Edwards, 2014a, 2014b; L'Etang, 2015; Yeomans, 2013, 2019) and Australia (Daymon and Demetrious, 2010, 2013; Fitch, 2016; Fitch and Third, 2010, 2013). It has exposed the realities of intersectional disadvantage for those with marginalized identities (particularly gender and ethnicity), including unequal pay, uneven career progression, and discrimination in the workplace, and has highlighted areas where improvement is required. Mundy's (2016) comprehensive overview of this scholarship in the US context also identifies a range of ways in which organizations could improve both representation and inclusivity in the pursuit of greater diversity, while Bardhan and Gower (2023) underline the importance of leadership for any ambition to make genuine progress on diversity and inclusion in public relations.

A second strand of research focuses on how (in)equalities are produced through internal and external communicative practices. These studies have shown that public relations has the capacity to contribute to a more equitable society (Austin et al., 2019; Ciszek et al., 2021; Ciszek and Logan, 2018; Logan, 2018, 2021), but that communication about inequality is complex, does not always have the required effects, and that avoidance of inauthenticity or 'wokewashing' is essential (Capizzo and Iannacone, 2023; Ciszek et al., 2023; Vardeman and Sebesta, 2020).

Most recently, scholars have engaged with the communication of DEI practices and policies in organizations (Ashby-King, 2023; Ashby-King and Anderson, 2023; Men et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023). Also here, public relations is recognized as a vehicle for communicating positive change (Logan, 2021a; Mundy, 2015; Pompper, 2021), but in making claims that raise expectations the 'say-do' gap persists, and there is a danger that a 'diversity paradox' emerges, where positive DEI communication undermines support for DEI in practice because it often results in disappointment. Alternatively, solutions for discrimination may inadvertently reinforce the neoliberal status quo where change is individualized rather than collective or systemic, and Whiteness continues to dominate (Ashby-King and Anderson, 2023; Bardhan and Engstrom, 2021; Institute for Public Relations and The Wakeman Agency, 2021).

The importance of this work notwithstanding, little scholarship has analyzed professional practices and processes as a locus of production of inequality, so that answers to the question 'how are inequalities produced through practice?' remain opaque. Yet, given that inequalities are systemic, the practices that produce them are a critical focus for research (Munshi and Edwards, 2011).

In this paper, we focus on the interaction between two aspects of professional practices – boundary-making and recruitment – to understand how they are implicated in the production of inequalities in public relations. Drawing on an exploratory study of PR recruitment in the UK context, we combine Abbott's (1995) theory of boundary-making in professional fields with existing research on the exclusionary dynamics of recruitment in professions, to explain why the professional logic of public relations recruitment consolidates the focus on client and candidate 'fit,' and is likely to work in favour of preserving the dominance of normative identities in the profession. This makes candidates who might be regarded as 'diverse' more vulnerable to exclusion, because diversity is perceived as a risk (to the client, to the recruiter's relationship with the client, and to the recruiter's revenue) rather than an opportunity. Consequently, the pursuit of diversity becomes a casualty of professional logic.

We first review Abbott's (1995) theory of boundary making as a foundation for the creation of professional fields. We then consider the role of recruitment as a locus of boundary making and a mechanism of exclusion in professional fields more generally, including public relations, before introducing the empirical study and analysis. Finally, we reflect on how the findings extend previous work on public relations' professional hierarchies and the limitations of diversity, and conclude with proposals for future research.

Theoretical background

Professional boundary-making and public relations

Professional fields are competitive, fluid, and bounded arenas of activity, where differentiation of task and jurisdiction legitimizes professional status and rewards (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). Their boundaries are defined in context and change as professional activities evolve and competitor fields emerge or change (Bourne, 2019). Abbott (1995) suggests that defining fields is a matter of defining the boundaries that produce social entities such as 'the public relations profession': through boundary-making, the internal constitution of a field emerges through repeated practices, or 'events that keep happening in the same way' (p. 871).

A focus on boundaries permits a view of the wider landscape from which professional fields emerge. They operate in 'linked ecologies' (Abbott, 2005) with other fields, and strategies to secure legitimacy for one field may constrain or facilitate the existence of others. According to Abbott (2005), successful legitimacy strategies – defined as 'hinges' – serve the priorities not only of the originating field, but also of other fields with which alliances can be established. Importantly, hinges benefit allied fields, but they also maintain separation – mutual benefit includes facilitating boundaries in ways that preserve separate claims to expertise and legitimacy made by the professions involved. The operation of boundary-making produces linked ecologies that are not 'even' topographies, but are characterized by connections through which professional expertise is continually 'remade through the exchange and co-ordination of multiple actants' (Brady, 2018: 128), benefiting dominant groups by reproducing their legitimacy across multiple fields.

In public relations, Bourne (2019) has shown how the industry has used different discursive processes across a range of texts and settings, to differentiate itself from competitive fields to which it is more or less closely connected. Here, boundary-making is primarily a function of the competitive professional ecology, and part of the ongoing industry struggle for jurisdiction as the environment changes. In this article, we approach boundary-making from a slightly different perspective, focusing on how the profession is also constructed across the linked fields of public relations and recruitment, through the deployment of criteria that define who may or may not be a 'public relations professional.' We consider how the fields of specialist public relations recruitment and public relations itself inhabit a linked ecology, and how the 'hinges' that underpin their interactions contribute to ensuring dominant forms of public relations and recruitment expertise are translated and remade (Brady, 2018), thereby securing their mutual preservation as professional fields. This kind of boundary-making contributes to public relations' professional legitimacy, but is enacted through collaborative, rather than competitive, practices that reflect the socially constructed identities and habitus of the profession.

Boundary-making and professional identity

The link between boundary-making and professional identity is grounded in the reality that boundary-making separates fields first and foremost on the basis of interests and values (Abbott, 1995, 2005). Research on professional recruitment illustrates how the latter are often based on gendered, racialized and classed stereotypes associated with social and cultural capital (Ballakrishnen, 2017; Bourdieu, 1984, 1997; Carter and Spence, 2014; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Rivera, 2012). In addition, because professionalism is interpreted in terms of clothing, deportment, and having a 'healthy' body (Waring and Waring, 2009), the body is a crucial form of gendered, racialized and classed symbolic capital for professionals (Haynes, 2012). The 'right' body lends confidence to practitioner and client (Edwards, 2013; Haynes, 2012; Yeomans, 2013) and is a lucrative form of relationship 'currency' that 'is converted into economic capital through winning work' (Carter and Spence, 2014: 972).

Cook et al. (2012) show how collective assumptions about forms of embodied and cultural capital lead to their translation as indicators of professional 'fit' and the reproduction of a 'middle class civility' (p. 1754) that helps to legitimise the legal profession. 'Fit' may be interpreted as a form of 'cultural matching' in professional contexts based on 'perceived similarity to a firm's existing employee base in leisure pursuits, background, and self-presentation' (Rivera, 2012: 1007). In public relations, research suggests that being able to claim the property of a middle-class, cis-gendered, youthful and able-bodied whiteness (Harris, 1993) protects status within the field and suggests alignment with existing norms (Edwards, 2014b; Pompper, 2013; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017). In other words, whiteness offers a political advantage as an identity that secures incumbents a degree of personal legitimacy; as such, they have 'an actual stake in racism' in the professional context (Crenshaw, 1988; cited in Harris, 1993: 1759) because it delivers important advantages that marginalized professionals do not always enjoy (Tomlinson et al., 2019). Other studies (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Harrington, 2017) have shown that the perceived ability to build client relationships, based on assessments of sociability and being 'at ease' in professional contexts, is central to recruitment decisions because it suggests the capacity to generate client trust, an essential underpinning for professional territory and legitimacy (Wreyford, 2015).

Repeated practices within fields generate common ground and normative expectations about identity, producing a relatively stable order that binds incumbents together (Cook et al., 2012; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). Bourdieu defines this kind of order as a field's 'doxa,' or the rules of the 'game' that lead to 'certain practices, particular forms of behaviour and embodiment including modes of dress, speech and interaction, [becoming] normalized as the occupational habitus' (Edwards, 2014b: 37). The consolidation of a field in this way leads to an evaluation of interests and values such that those already perceived to align with the status quo are more desirable (because they contribute to a secure professional identity). Boundary-making processes are likely to reflect this, invoking assumptions about social and cultural capital and translating them into 'expertise.' The figure of the client is an important reference point here as a disciplinary presence in professional contexts, used to evaluate practitioners' suitability in their roles (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). Research on public relations has confirmed that expertise is associated with gendered and classed forms of whiteness aligned with client identities and needs (Edwards, 2014b; Logan, 2011; Pompper, 2005; Vardeman-Winter, 2011), with understanding the client, and with delivering the services they require (Treem, 2016).

As the discussion above suggests, existing scholarship shows the professional habitus of public relations is one where practitioners' intersectional identities, related to a range of 'primary social definers' (Anthias, 2001) such as gender, race, class, physical ability, sexuality and others, play a significant role in their careers (Edwards, 2022). They produce different combinations of privilege and disadvantage (Carbado and Harris, 2019; Levine-Rasky, 2011), based on the 'structures, politics, and representations' associated with those identity categories (Vardeman-Winter and Tindall, 2010: 4). Intersectionally disadvantaged identities (e.g. characterized by racialization, class disadvantage and gender bias) are likely to be marginalized. Correspondingly, boundary-making enacted through the interactions of public relations with specialist public relations recruitment is likely to invoke criteria that echo this status quo. However, the question remains as to how boundary-making happens in practice to produce marginalization. In the next section we introduce the empirical study, before presenting the analysis and discussion.

Method

Given that very little research has been conducted on the practices of recruitment professionals working in and for public relations companies, we adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach. We conducted in-depth interviews with 16 UK-based public relations recruiters in 2015. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather a detailed empirical understanding of their recruitment practices, to reveal the complex dynamics of client and candidate relationships, and to understand their perceptions of those relationships in relation to their own professional identities. Our aim was to understand how boundary-making emerged based on a rich understanding of practice; the in-depth, semi-structured approach facilitated this by ensuring participants could discuss any aspect of their work that they felt relevant to our conversation (Fontana and Frey, 2003). It kept the interviews focused, but incorporated enough flexibility for participants to add additional insights, and for us to follow up on interesting points or ask for more detail (Brinkmann, 2020).

Invitations to participate were distributed via the Recruitment and Employment Confederation, the Public Relations Consultants' Association, and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations. Additional online searches for specialist recruitment agencies were conducted and personalized invitations sent to potential participants. 17 recruiters participated, 11 from recruitment consultancies and 4 in-house (2 in public sector organizations, and 2 in PR agency settings). Four were male, presenting as white British, 12 were female, also presenting as white British.

The interviews focused on professional identities and practices. Participants were interviewed in a location of their choice and given an information sheet and consent form before participating. They were reminded before the interview that they could withdraw at any time, but none did. First, we invited participants to tell us about the identity of a 'good' recruiter, the routines of recruitment work, skills required, and the types of relationships fostered with clients and candidates. We then asked about the specific processes used in recruitment (e.g. receipt of the client brief, evaluating candidates). Finally, we asked about their understanding of diversity, its importance to their practice and to clients.

Edwards is a white British middle-aged female academic, and Aulakh is a British middle-aged female academic of South Asian heritage. We both have professional work experience outside the academy and our professional and personal backgrounds shaped our standpoints, including an interest in professional fields and a commitment to greater equity within public relations and professions more broadly. Interviews are a social interaction where the potential for impression management and emotional labour on both sides is always present (Lillrank, 2012; Warren, 2012). We were careful not to overtly respond positively or negatively to participants' accounts, and this shaped our own self-management in the interviews (Lillrank, 2012). We did not want our positionality to compromise the frankness of the conversations or our rapport with participants, so where responses were challenging to us, we nodded, used filler words (umm, hmm), or asked additional questions, to avoid misinterpretation. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min and were transcribed.

The transcripts were analyzed using a critical thematic approach (Lawless and Chen, 2019). The first coding iteration identified dominant ideas in participants' narratives based on their recurrence (of meaning), repetition (of specific vocabulary) and forcefulness (vocal emphasis by the interviewee) (Owen, 1984). This gave us a systematic insight into recruitment identity and practices. In light of the literature, particular attention was paid to participants' connections to the client (e.g. 'service provider,' 'matchmaker,' 'taking the brief'), and to the rationales they gave for evaluating candidates (e.g. 'embodiment'; 'fit – cultural capital'; 'mirror image recruiting,' 'client requirements'), in order to access ideas that might relate to boundary-making and diversity. In the second iteration, the professional structures were coded ('hinge,' 'boundary') that the described practices produced through their repetition, including their relevance to professional legitimacy and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. We first discuss the processes that recruiters undertook before considering how, through these processes, the concepts of client and 'fit' emerge as hinges that benefit the two fields, in ways that are likely to reproduce intersectional inequalities in the public relations workforce.

Findings

The recruitment process: The brief and beyond

The interviews revealed five main steps in the recruitment process. First, client research, where as much information about the potential client and role is gathered either in response to a brief, or as part of a proactive approach to secure new business. Second, candidate scoping, where the recruiter searches databases and personal networks for potential candidates for a given role. Third, candidate screening, where potential candidates are interviewed and evaluated for suitability. Fourth, candidate proposal, where candidates who screen successfully are put forward to the client. Fifth, client-candidate mediation, where the recruiter mediates between the successful candidate and the client, to secure a mutually acceptable job offer. In this section, we illustrate how these steps emerge in practice.

Participants began their description of the recruitment process with an explanation of the knowledge they tried to develop about clients. In conjunction with taking a brief for a specific role, they engaged in extensive efforts to get to know the client and their organization in great detail. They conducted in-depth research on clients, their businesses and business priorities, and the markets they operated in; they visited offices to understand the organizational culture and the team where a post would reside; and they had detailed conversations with management about their longer-term ambitions for the new appointee.

> we talk to them about […] who they see as their competitors in the market, what sort of personality they like. […] I'd arrange a meeting with the client to go and see them, see their offices, see what sort of business they're like, culture as well. I think it's essential. *HR2*

The client connection was grounded in a strong identification with the public relations industry. As providers of an important service, they emphasized that to be successful, they had to know more about public relations, its practices and the latest trends, than about their own profession.

> the way we tell any new recruits that we take on internally into our team is that we are working within the PR industry and not within the recruitment industry. It's just a way that we phrase it just in order to kind of give them a good understanding of the level of knowledge that we need of the PR industry. So we are expected to keep fully up to date with anything that's going on really. *HR9*

After the brief was confirmed, recruiters searched for candidates via their databases and networks. Once identified, the skills and experience on a candidate's CV were reviewed. A positive review meant that the candidate was invited to a phone call with the recruiter. From this point, a candidate's skills and knowledge were largely taken for granted, and assessment was dominated by the consideration of how well the candidate met the client's needs in other, less formal ways.

The phone call acted as an initial sorting mechanism, used to get a sense of a candidate's personality without having to meet face-to-face (saving time for the recruiter), and of their suitability based on their speaking abilities (clarity, accent, fluency), energy and positivity. These judgements were made with the client in mind, and often referred to aspects of the interaction that had nothing to do with a candidate's skills or expertise. For example, HR4 extrapolates their own assumptions into an imagined client response: "if they're really heavily accented then the client will probably say to me, 'Okay. If they've got to speak to a journalist, will the journalist be able to understand them?.'" The ability to assess candidates on a purely verbal interaction was often described in terms of the recruiter's instinct, which was frequently framed as implicit knowledge that constituted expert judgement: 'I get a feel purely from, I mean even just a phone call I start to get a feel. And I know whether it's, okay, do I meet them, do I not meet them' (HR8).

A successful phone call meant the candidate was invited to an in-person meeting to find out more about them. Recruiters recorded impressions of the person and 'how they work' (HR9), as well as more specific aspects of their skills and experience, confirming the detail on their CV. Candidates were evaluated for their social skills (e.g., coming across as boring was generally negative), interests (e.g., having the same sporting interests as the client was positive) and personality. In these meetings, the power of the client figure was particularly evident. Evaluations are referenced to the recruiter's implicit understanding of the client, their business, and the need to obtain a 'match,' as HR5's explanation illustrates:

> We interview them and find out are they right. Assess their personality, talk to them about the role. Talk to them about what [their] aspirations are, what their motivations are, is that in line with what the client is looking for? [...] What's really important to that person, is it money, is it international travel, is it flexibility? Learning, is that matching the environment that we're about to put them into? *HR5*

Following the meeting, successful candidates were put forward to a client, along with an explanation of why they were appropriate not only for a particular role, but also as someone who would 'fit' the team, organization and brand. This process completes the evaluation of candidates by the recruiter, but is still critical for their legitimacy because it is when their knowledge and understanding of client and brand is evidenced. As one participant put it: 'We are being paid by the client to make sure that we are sending them people that are perfect' (HR9). Poor candidate selection wasted the client's time, implied a disconnect between recruiter and client, and endangered both immediate revenue as well as income that would come from a successful ongoing relationship. It was also a personal risk, because professional expertise could be called into question.

> [W]hy would I recruit anyone who I had a moment's hesitation with when I was meeting them? Because it would just be a white elephant in the room and everybody would distrust me and my recruiting methods and my selection process, and integrity. *In-house 1*

If candidates were offered the position, the recruiter's role shifted from evaluating to mediating as feedback from both client and candidate revealed their respective judgements about the opportunity. Participants explained how they advised both parties about the kind of package that could be expected, but the quote below also reveals the emotional support they provided (keeping them happy, absorbing stress) in order to maximise the possibility of a match - here framed almost as if it were a wedding.

> We try to keep both sides happy and so we […] absorb some of the stress. […] A classic is where […] a candidate wants X money. Client doesn't want to pay that much money. You keep that friction away from both and you manage it to get to a happy resolution so that they can kind of walk down the aisle together and start the new role. *HR11*

Once candidates were placed, recruiters maintained contact with them and the client to build a more personal rapport that could, ultimately, lead to future opportunities.

The 'hinge': Boundary-making through client identification and 'fit'

To understand how the above steps constitute boundary-making, it is necessary to examine the detail of their execution, and the ways in which participants reflected on them in relation to their own professional roles, identities and expertise.

The client was a dominant concept in participants' narratives. The term was repeated frequently but was also present in the recurring ideas of service, industry knowledge, and recruitment expertise and identity. The starting point for good recruitment, according to one participant, was good knowledge of the client.

> The process of recruitment isn't difficult but what's hard is being able to understand the client's business. I think trying to get under the skin of that, that's what makes you good if you actually really understand it. *HR4*

Relatedly, the focus on developing public relations knowledge as a form of specialist expertise, described by HR9 above, frames their identity as part of the public relations profession, and implicitly cites 'client' expectations to 'keep fully up to date.'

Close work on and with clients, particularly early in the recruitment process, was justified by their priority as the source of revenue (as well as internal legitimacy, for those working in-house). As HR5 put it, 'you have to remember who's paying the fee.' Moreover, a client-centered narrative of recruitment expertise supports current and future income because it promises a strong client relationship and accurate delivery of a suitable candidate. As HR11 says, 'our job is to present them with a shortlist of people who can absolutely do the job.'

Extensive knowledge about the client was converted into a partial assimilation of the client's identity as part of the recruiter role. For example, participants framed the work of evaluating candidates as 'standing in' for clients: 'there are multiple things that you can look for in an interview, but it's no different to what the client would look for in an interview as well' (HR6). Evaluation was done from the client's perspective, in relation to the brands they serviced and their organizational cultures. Successful assimilation delivered successful recruitment (defined as a positive outcome for recruiter, client and candidate) and in this way client knowledge could be claimed as a form of expertise and secured as a mutually beneficial 'hinge' between the two fields.

In its role as a 'hinge,' invoking 'the client' produces a set of practices through which both recruitment and public relations can realize their professional goals. However, client knowledge alone was not enough: candidate knowledge was also essential to doing the job well and was developed through the different stages of the recruitment process. Nonetheless, in contrast to the pursuit of a broad client understanding, each candidate encounter had the clear purpose of evaluating suitability for a post – current, or future – to which the recruiter might be able to match them. As noted above, the figure of the client persisted in these encounters as the filter through which recruiters assessed the candidates. Moreover, these encounters are one-sided: the recruiter's perceptions of the candidate are the only basis for evaluation. Because only the recruiter can claim extensive knowledge of the client's needs for the new post, candidates have no basis for challenging their judgement or the conclusions they have drawn about the priorities for the role. The result is an evaluation that relies on a high degree of subjective assessment, particularly of candidates' social and cultural capital, in order to establish whether or not a candidate will 'fit' the brief.

The articulation and assessment of 'fit' is the mechanism that realizes the benefits of the client 'hinge' for the two fields. An accurate evaluation of candidates in relation to clients secured successful placements: 'by actually taking a vested interest in client and candidate you're more likely to get a match' (HR1). Successful placements in turn reinforced the reputation and financial success of recruiters (who earn their commission by ensuring 'fit') and their public relations clients (whose new employee adds to the stability and legitimacy of the organization and field). Practitioners explained the idea of 'fit' as a process grounded in 'cultural' norms and expectations.

> Cultural fit is just – it's a crucial part of hiring. I guess in the client side it's just every company has its own culture, whether it's super corporate and a bit stuffy, a bit old school, a big boss with an office and an ego and everyone else. And then you get the more flat companies which are more casual and a bit more entrepreneurial. So a very corporate person wouldn't fit into that environment. But from the candidates' side, it's the same. How I describe it to my candidates is the gut feeling. You know when you just meet someone or you go and meet a company and then you just come out and you just – your gut knows whether you feel like you connected with them and whether you feel like it could work with them, and that I think – for a candidate that's the cultural fit. Because it's as important for them as it is for the company. *HR7*

Some participants extended the idea of 'fit' to a comparison with a dating agency and used the term 'chemistry' to define a positive interaction with a candidate and themselves or a client. This terminology reinforces the importance of the emotional and affective dimensions of evaluation. Success was often defined in language that echoed romantic relationships, where an emotional connection between client and candidate was achieved based on the recruiter's knowledge of their respective interests and values, rather than simply a skills alignment.

> A lot of first interviews nowadays are chemistry meetings. So it's not so much about me, a company, saying to you, do you tick all my boxes, it's more of an exchange where two parties come together and actually decide whether long-term – it's almost like dating. I would say that my role is much closer to dating agent than it is to recruiter. *HR10*

Delivering 'fit' was framed as delivering accurately on a brief, reading client requirements effectively, knowing candidates, and demonstrating recruitment expertise by getting the match right. Yet, for most participants, these professional judgements were based on their instinctive response to a candidate, as the following quote illustrates.

> You just may instinctively know when you've spoken to them that they're just not going to be right. Right, okay. You just get that feeling. So, it's, it's just one of those things that you just, you just real-I mean I know really. Or, if it's a borderline, I'll talk to the client and say, look I've got one here that I think is borderline, I'll send over the CV, what do you think? *HR8*

The operationalization of client and recruiter interests through 'fit,' based on these subjective and instinctive judgements of candidates' identity, social and cultural capital, and professional capability, was the point at which the exclusionary dynamics of boundary-making were most visible. For example, when discussing face-to-face meetings, participants started to reveal the ways in which gender, race, class, and other vectors of discrimination, shaped their perspective, and how such judgements were normalized as an inevitable consequence of professional logic and the client imperative.

In the quote below, for example, HR2 initially denies the importance of 'race or background' as a basis for evaluating a candidate, but immediately and forcefully caveats this ('obviously') in relation to 'skill set and stuff like that,' suggesting that assumptions about the latter can indeed be influenced by the former. They conclude by arguing that 'cultural references' are important, but in separating them from 'race [or] background,' fail to recognise that assumptions about 'cultural references' – a form of cultural capital – are themselves gendered, racialized and classed.

> You know when you just know that someone's not going to fit in an organization. […] I do make those snap judgments but then they've never been based around race or the background of that person. I mean obviously it depends on the skill set and stuff like that again, but I would say a lot of it comes down to a lot of the more softer things of cultural references, of whether or not they would fit into an organisation. *HR2*

Other participants revealed explicit assumptions about skills based on racialized and classed identities. For example, HR7 declared themselves as overtly supportive of diversity but also assumed that people from different ethnicities were unlikely to have a 'good education.' They universalized their personal experience of attending a university with very little diversity, to argue that ‘different upbringings and education can affect how people are.’

> It’s like, what do you – because I don’t think that’s – it’s not as much an issue as it’s – you know, we’ve got plenty of black candidates, we’ve got plenty of – all sorts of backgrounds and ethnicity, but the thing with all those candidates, they talk the talk but [think] that’s all you need to do, it doesn’t matter where – again, it’s the educational thing and the articulate and – and so that’s I don’t think – I don’t think a client would ever be against someone being black. *HR7*

The basis for evaluation is presented here in terms of apparently objective measures (education, articulation), but the recognition of discrimination is revealed in the repeated hesitations while making a racist argument that homogenises all ‘black candidates’ and associates ethnicity with poor education. Moreover, ‘those candidates’ are also constructed as non-normative and being less trustworthy, talking ‘the talk’ but deceptive about their true abilities. The last phrase re-centres and normalizes the client as the reference point for evaluation, while simultaneously denying the importance of race in their preferences.

Other responses indicated the different ways in which candidates’ bodies were invoked as racialized, classed indicators of ‘fit,’ contributing directly to evaluation decisions. The following example reveals the important role that brand plays as an extension of client identity for evaluation:

> I had to ensure that this candidate was a brand ambassador. It sounds awful, but I could not have somebody that was (sighs) – and I’m going to be really honest with you— covered in acne, which is not anyone’s fault at all to have that, and who was sort of a size 18, because it just wouldn’t fit with their brand. Funnily enough, the girl I placed was Mexican, although English, natural looking, her whole charm and everything and anyway she got placed. But I had to meet her. I had to do about three or four interviews to ensure that this person was on brand to work at [company] on Bond Street. *HR1*

In this example, embodiment was central to ‘fit’. The participant defines unsuitability in terms of imperfect skin and larger body size, while the successful candidate is ‘natural-looking.’ The judgement is also gendered and classed: the client is an exclusive company in one of London’s most elite districts, and the evaluations echo a version of ‘middle-class civility’ that characterises professionalism (Cook et al., 2012). The phrase ‘funnily enough’ suggests surprise that the successful candidate was Mexican, but her success is explained by the qualification that she embodied a gendered ‘Englishness,’ exhibiting ‘charm and everything’ – although suitability still had to be confirmed through several interviews.

Discrimination is simultaneously recognized by this participant (in her confessional ‘and I’m going to be really honest with you’) and excused, because being unsuitable is ‘not anyone’s fault’ and is based on brand and client fit, rather than the recruiter’s subjective judgements. Here, as for other participants, business interests are the yardstick for success. In this way, the idea of 'fit' helped to justify discriminatory decisions as a straightforward matching process that benefits all concerned.

Conclusion

Recruitment practitioners do not belong to the field of public relations in a strict sense, but their work is fundamental to the make-up of the profession. As the results of this study suggest, the 'hinge' of the client, operationalized through the idea of 'fit,' provides mutual benefit and competitive advantage to both public relations and recruitment, ensuring the continued circulation of legitimacy and profit between these tightly connected fields, public relations clients, and (via 'brand' fit) their customers.

The operation of client and 'fit' as hinges, revealed through this study, may be understood more parsimoniously in terms of three key steps. First, the client's business context, priorities, and culture are *assimilated* by the recruiter, so that candidates can be evaluated from the client's perspective. More specifically, this enables recruiters to act *as* the client, in order to make judgements that are as accurate an assessment of client interests as possible. Second, on meeting the candidate, the recruiter *projects* the individual into the client context, and uses this imaginary to evaluate candidate suitability in relation to the client. Third, the recruiter recognizes the client's interest in candidates that 'fit' as *their own business interests*, based on the fact that supporting the client by evaluating candidates effectively simultaneously protects their own revenue.

It is of course the case that sometimes, a 'diverse' identity is positive, because it is good for the client's business. For example, one successful placement of a 'diverse' candidate was described as a means to access 'fresh thinking.' '[The client] was thrilled to have that injection, so I think it brings fresh thinking and it challenges thinking. You know, […] it's good to have people who are different because they'll have different views and you get to a better answer' (HR11). If outcomes for marginalised candidates can be positive, this begs the question of whether there is potential for diversity to also act as a hinge, alongside the client. Clearly, the current orientation towards the client, operationalized through the idea of 'fit,' can produce occupational exclusion. However, equality law in the UK forbids discrimination in the vast majority of cases, suggesting that the danger of bias could be mitigated and there may be a societal payback for committing to diversity even if it is not a client requirement (Austin et al., 2019; Capizzo and Iannacone, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

To find out how the formal obligation to equality played out in the context of delivering to clients, we asked participants whether they would accept a client brief that specified a particular type of person. In response, many participants said they would not. However, their comments revealed the difficulty of adopting this non-discriminatory approach and still satisfying the client. In the following quotes, both participants fall back on the principle of ensuring successful placement, connecting people 'who can be hired and will be hired,' as the fundamental rationale for decisions about suitability.

> If someone says, "Look, the last three hires who were men. We can't hire a man; it just looks ridiculous if we do. We need to hire a woman," then obviously if I then put forward a short list

> with men on it, it probably wouldn't be productive because he's not going to hire them. What we're trying to do here is get people together who can be hired and will be hired. *HR6*

> there can be a lot of things that come into play in terms of where they're from, backgrounds, personalities. I would hate to say colour. I would hate to say race but I think that might — You know, for [company] I don't think she would have hired — [...] I would want to say yes [I would put forward a competent Asian candidate], but I would struggle to see if she would have got an interview. *HR2*

Thus, diversity is still assessed in relation to client requirements and discrimination is depoliticized, attributed to (unsuitable) candidate characteristics rather than to processes grounded in bias that perpetuate the systemic reality of structural inequalities. In other words, 'fit' still trumps diversity as an evaluation criterion. This means diversity is not reliable enough as an evaluation criterion to guarantee mutual benefit for both fields. In contrast, focusing on the client generates a raft of normalized practices that ensure a 'match' that reinforces the client's professional legitimacy, as well as the recruiter's reputation and claim to expertise. In this way, the hinges of client and 'fit' are not only translated into practices that ensure mutual professional success, but also rationalize why some candidates are admissible to the public relations industry, and others discarded.

While the understanding and assimilation of client interests was presented by participants as a form of expertise and/or business logic, the findings show that the figure of the client is not neutral. On the contrary, a candidate's racialized, gendered and classed embodiment are taken to indicate social and cultural capital that suggests a better or worse 'fit,' based on the subjective evaluation and self-interest of the 'recruiter-as-client.' In other words, while evaluating candidates may be generously framed as a process of 'matchmaking' that produces a happy partnership, the priority is to secure revenue for both recruiter and client; the candidate's interests and opinions are secondary. Moreover, as Abbott (1995) argues, the repetition of practice consolidates boundaries; from this perspective, the repeated invocation of race, class and gender as a basis for judgements about suitability not only excludes certain types of candidate, but also reinforces the intersectional whiteness of public relations in the UK, as well as the legitimacy of evaluating candidates based on discriminatory and subjective criteria, claimed as recruitment 'expertise.'

Limitations and future research directions

This study was a small, exploratory investigation based in the UK and the findings cannot be extrapolated to other contexts without further research. The study was also carried out before the murder of George Floyd, the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent increased public profile of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. It is possible that participants' answers may have been more 'diversity-aware' and focused on improving diversity, had the interviews been carried out more recently.

Another important limitation of the study lies in the sample: the participants were specific to the UK context, and were all white. While there was a mix of genders, the sample was predominantly female. As Waymer et al. (2023) have argued, recognizing and valuing diversity requires us to try harder to integrate diversity not only into the topics we address, but also into our research methods and execution. In the context of this study, the sample profile means that the perspectives of diverse recruiters are not visible in the data, and means they cannot contribute to the argument made here about the ways in which practitioners are marginalized through recruitment processes. Their insights need to be part of future research agendas and empirical investigations in this area.

These issues notwithstanding, the findings do confirm the importance of understanding the contribution of specialist recruitment to public relations' professional structures and identities. More research is needed on how these fields intersect to produce and perpetuate the lack of diversity, as well as how they might be changed to reduce inequalities. Organizational contexts and professional specialisms also merit attention, given that the tailoring of recruitment to client requirements means that different sectors and organizational types are likely to influence the ways that recruitment unfolds (Tomlinson et al., 2019). Ultimately, it is essential to analyze diversity and discrimination as systemic issues, rather than a matter of individual behaviour or organizational process. Vectors of discrimination within public relations are connected to wider social hierarchies and inequalities that permeate our thinking; unless the impact of these is taken into account in research and practice, professional measures to improve diversity are unlikely to succeed.

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